Rec'd Oct. 1931 5:16

A SECOND CENTURY OF HOME MISSIONS

By
REV. ARTHUR M. ELLIS
Pastor Central Congregational Church
Newtonville, Massachusetts

Cong'l Lesin —

CONGREGATIONAL
CHURCH EXTENSION BOARDS
287 Fourth Avenue, New York

THE SECOND CENTURY OF HOME MISSIONS

A SHORT time ago I was talking with one of our thoughtful laymen about the problems of our Home Missionary work, when he said, "How long is this thing to last? I had an idea that as the West became thoroughly established, our Home Missionary needs would decrease. Of course I know there are small communities in the West that have not grown as we expected when we established churches there. I know also that there are communities in the East which are losing their populations, so there will always be some little work for the Home Missionary Society to do. But even that little can be reduced by a sane policy of federation and what is left ought to be a State and not a National concern. Thus why this demand for ever increasing funds for a National Society?"

I imagine many of our laymen are thinking along that line, and I feel that this is the time when we ought to declare the outstanding features of our second century program of Home Missions, as it now presents itself. Our problem has changed. Dr. Malcolm Dana is our prophet of the new rural needs. He is forcing us to realize that we have in no sense evangelized the rural community when we have succeeded in establishing preaching stations there. If we are to adequately serve our rural parishes we must meet an enriched rural life with an enlarged rural program. That program alone would justify our continued appeals for larger funds. But that is by no means the whole story.

The new century finds us faced by the demand

for an entirely new program of activity for all our work. The thing of the moment is not the establishing of pioneer outposts for an ever enlarging frontier, but is the care of the people who are forming one of the greatest migrations of history. Two great challenges are being forced upon us:

1. From the standpoint of the American Church, the first new challenge of today is that challenge of the suburbs. We hear a great deal about the lure of the city, a lure that is not new. The glamor of the city is almost as old as civilization. It has been a factor in the life of every nation. To it the Dick Whittingtons have been drawn in their poverty and in it they have dreamed of power and fortune. Today, however, the city is not wholly a matter of pride and glory, but is becoming somewhat of a great oppression.

As to the great cities come hosts of new people, the original inhabitants are moving en masse to the suburbs. Suburbanitis is a modern development. Excessive land values, creating high rents, together with over-crowded conditions are driving whole armies of people from the city to the suburbs. Especially is that true of the young married people, who want not only cheaper rents, but wider streets, bigger building lots, and more congenial surroundings for their children's sakes. This movement has come upon us so gradually that even those who are a part of it fail to appreciate the gigantic proportions of the movement itself. In one suburb of New York, for instance, the population is growing at the rate of more than one hundred thousand a year. Every great city can tell a similar story.

In these centers of population is where we find our first challenge today. True, these are not poor people, who cannot afford to build their own churches, but they are increasingly becoming a people indifferent to the claims of the church. We cannot too seriously regret that an outgrown method of Home Missionary publicity has somehow taught us to think of Home Missions in terms of "Log Cabins" and "Backward Groups" as though our program was one of social service instead of one of religious inspiration. Poor people have not a monopoly on spiritual needs. As people move from small houses to larger ones they take their spiritual needs with them and they increase our difficulties because they take from us our easiest form of approach.

It is very easy to give people something for nothing, and then while they are in a thankful mood, preach to them our particular gospel. But this suburban problem is entirely different and we Congregationalists are partly to blame for one difficult part of the situation. We have been among the leaders of modern theology. I imagine we have done as much as any church in America to destroy the literal interpretation of Heaven and Hell, and to create the idea that whether the upper and lower regions of the future are real or not, we are concerned with the destruction of the hells which exist on this earth and the establishing of the Kingdom in social righteousness. And there are no people in the world who have appropriated this doctrine more truly than the residents of the suburbs.

There is developing a suburban type of mind. The suburbs of most cities are pleasant places

where the smoke and fever of the cities are left behind and where Babbitt and his tribe are in danger of dominating the situation. Here is where the American home reigns supreme. During the day time the suburb is the abode of women and children, a few preachers, policemen, and storekeepers, but the rest of the male residents are away.

As the families move out to the suburbs they intend to go back to the old church or join the local organization when they can get to it. But there is so much to do about the house they have just bought. The lawn is very much like the young man's first moustache—it needs constant care and coaching if anything is to come of it. There is painting to be done, shelves to be put up, and one hundred and one things to attend to. Sunday seems to be the only day when such things can be done. Then, of course, spells of homesickness come and the old city has to be visited. Relatives in the city love to get away for a visit to the young people. Again Sunday seems to be the only day available. Then the newcomer generally finds the neighbors of the suburbs unusually neighborly. They are nearly all young; love to play cards and to dance, and Saturday night seems to be the best night for these things, and Sunday morning comes all too soon after such an affair.

Again, life in the suburbs is apt to be so pleasant that one begins to wonder if after all the church is quite as necessary as it used to be. One's neighbors seem to be good people; well-behaved in spite of the fact that they seldom go nearer the church than their automobile takes them on the way to the Sunday picnic grounds.

High calibre men seem to remain morally decent with the spiritual help of Sunday golf, and the midweek services also held on the golf links. Now, these are not bad people. They are among the finest our country knows anything about, but the danger is that unless the church has a vigorous program in order to attract them early in their suburban experience, they will become callous and indifferent to the church appeal.

From the standpoint of the suburban church the thing is not as easy as it first seems. Where church buildings already exist they are altogether inadequate. They were built by men who had no idea of the present trend of things. When those buildings were erected, what are now great centres of population were sleepy little villages with small church organizations, and buildings that were sufficient for those needs are now of little use. The local organization cannot immediately afford to put up great buildings, nor are the new people willing to associate themselves with an institution which begins right at the start to demand heavy contributions. Most suburbanites are paying for their homes and carrying heavy financial loads. The local church cannot take care of them with its present equipment. The new people are not interested until the equipment is increased.

What then are we to do? We ought to do the thing we are forever hoping to do, but which is still only a hope because of our need of funds: namely, to increase our idea of church aid. Instead of giving $2,500 or $2,000 to start a little frame building in a Western community, we have to put in fifteen, or twenty, or twenty-five thousand dollars in order to make the slightest

impression upon these great hosts of new people. And from a business point of view it is about the best money we spend, because this is not an eternal job. We are merely helping organizations to get started. In a very short time these churches not only become self-supporting, but become also heavy contributors to the National Societies. In fact the Church Extension Boards in their work in these fields are building great power houses for the rest of the benevolent organizations of the denomination, because from these new churches will later come both the financial strength and the leadership of the church.

These suburban communities offer Congregationalism the greatest chance of its history. Most suburbanites have left city communities where rival churches have fought for existence. They do not see why they should begin that old rivalry in a new community, when by working with other Christian people they can have a more adequate and more worthwhile institution. In order to get away from denominational emphasis some communities have tried what they call a community church. As yet the experiment is not successful. The community churches are still in the experimental stage. They have little or no historic sense. They are usually so democratic that their control is liable to get into the hands of men who know more about community politics than they do about religion. As yet they have no adequate ministerial supply, so have to be content with the services of free-lance ministers; good men, but too often men, who because of a lack of definite religious convictions, or because of personal idiosyncrasies feel themselves unfitted for denominational work. And here,

where the community church is failing to satisfy, Congregationalism supplies the need. We are liberal, but Christian; we have a glorious tradition, but that does not limit our courage for future experiments.

Many communities can duplicate the experience I had in the church I served before going to Newtonville. There we had a splendid loyal Congregational institution, and still the 340 people who came to us from other churches during my pastorate, came in this order:

First, the Presbyterians; second, the Methodists; third, the Dutch Reformed; fourth, the Baptists; Congregationalists were fifth on the list, Episcopalians and Lutherans running a close sixth and seventh. We also had small groups such as the Universalists, French Evangelicals, Church of the Nazarene, United Brethren, and even Catholics and Hebrews.

It is in communities like that, which leaders of other denominations have declared to be the greatest missionary fields in the world today, that our first challenge lies. We must establish social centers and strong programs of community leadership in order to save these great American populations from a materialism which threatens to be more deadly than the old blatant, crude blasphemy of frontier conditions, because it is more decent, less revolting, and more normal, therefore, more deadly. Surely America can never be Christian unless this challenge is accepted right away.

2. The second challenge is that of the foreign born and the children of the foreign born. Some time ago I spoke of the migration that is flowing from the city to the suburbs. Why?

High rents? Yes, partly that, but we all know that chiefly the secret of that migration is found in the type of people who are flocking to our cities. Every city in America has its foreign population and the very presence of these people brings us a challenge we dare not fail to accept. We used to evade the problem by declaring that these were not our people. They were the problem of the Catholic Church; thus we felt free to enter or leave communities as we wished. But somehow we are coming to realize that in our educational system we are secularizing the younger generation of these people by what we call a program of Americanization. We are teaching the children of the foreign born to differ from their parents in language, custom and loyalty, and then we marvel that the religion of the parents fails to hold authoritatively this new generation. The Roman Church with its Parochial School system appreciates this problem. She realizes that she cannot lose the children at school age and be held responsible for them afterwards.

And we cannot reject the challenge though it should mean making a radical change in our Home Missionary machinery. Instead of gearing our Boards for the primary purpose of establishing new churches, nurturing youthful churches, and aiding old churches that are ministering to partially forsaken communities, we shall realize that, not only must a new function be recognized for our Boards, but that eventually this new effort will demand first place in our program.

Even those of us who have given much time and thought to the Home Missionary problem of

the country are sometimes startled when we realize how rapidly our program is changing to the city problem. As Congregationalists we have long been in the habit of boasting of the fact that we are the American Church, but we cannot long make that boast if by it we mean that we minister primarily to the people of old American stock. The American Church of the future will be that institution which ministers most acceptably not only to those of Pilgrim heritage. Such ministering will not necessarily mean the starting of foreign speaking churches. We Congregationalists have never been very successful at that kind of thing, and in the last analysis we are not sure that that program makes for the best interests of our country. But it will mean the equipping of existing churches so that they can adequately minister to their communities.

It has been with a sense of failure that we have seen our churches move with the moving of their people whenever a community change takes place; but the churches have not been to blame. The policy of our Boards has made such moving necessary as a matter of self-preservation for the individual organization. Our responsibility in this matter of community change is being illustrated in several ways:

a. The attitude of our National Council to the program of the First Church of Washington is one instance. There we have a strong church, able to adequately care for the needs of its people, able to build a church large enough to satisfy the local program. But that church is not able to care for the thousands of transients who annually visit the Capitol City and worship with the First Congregational Church. The denomina-

tion is not interested in the idea of erecting a Cathedral of Congregationalism in Washington. That whole idea is contrary to the genius of Congregationalism and is ridiculous. But we do recognize the fact that the members of the First Congregational Church ought not to be expected to build and maintain a plant large enough to accommodate Congregationalists from every state in the Union whenever they happen to be in the Capitol City.

If the local church is ready to minister to this enlarged parish, the responsibilty for the providing of equipment is not theirs, but ours. Thus the National Council has not appealed to the denomination for aid for the Washington Church, but has appealed on the basis that there lies a national responsibility.

b. The situation of our churches located in college towns is another example of the same thing. Our National Home Missionary Society and Church Building Society are finding it necessary to go to the aid of strong churches, churches which a decade ago would not have contemplated appealing to us for help of any kind. They were, and are, able to take care of themselves, but they are not able to cope with the crowds of young people who flock to the universities and colleges of their locality. So as a denomination we have come to see that these extra parish opportunities of our college churches are our responsibility. Thus we are aiding in the support of student pastors in the enlarging of social equipment of the church plant, so that the finest type of Christian service can be rendered to our sons and daughters while they are away from the home church. We are not carry-

ing the burdens of the local church, we are merely helping the local church to operate in the way that will safeguard the spiritual life of our young people.

c. Now something like that must be recognized as our Home Missionary attitude towards the foreign groups in our cities. It will mean going to churches in changing communities before they have become so weakened that all hope of usefulness is gone. It will mean helping them to see that the changing nature of their community does not destroy their usefulness, but merely changes their program. How many of our churches could have been saved to the denomination and to their communities if only that had been our policy in the past.

One reason why our churches decline so rapidly when once a community change begins is because of the apparent hopelessness of the situation. The local church, seeing its own members gradually slipping away, immediately cuts down its financial program just at the time when an enlarged program is necessary for the work that is to be done. Then the members themselves become discouraged and the thing gradually and surely slips until either the building is sold, or the congregation has moved, or the church dies out.

But that is not necessary. South Church, Brooklyn, New York, is a splendid illustration of what can be done in such conditions. A few years ago the men of Greater New York were regarding the South Church as an institution that had been great, but they believed that its glory had departed. Its members were rapidly moving into other sections of the city, or out

into the suburbs. The final collapse of the old church seemed to be only a matter of time. Of course it was recognized that the glorious ministry of that Saint of God, Albert J. Lyman, still gave prestige to the institution, and a strong group of people were still deeply attached to the church, but none the less its great days were apparently over. Then came the remarkably strong leadership of its present pastor, Rev. R. A. McConnell, a man who knows how to conserve all the old loyalties and use them for the creation of a new program. They have Church Schools composed largely of foreign born children; visitors are employed who are able to enter with understanding the homes of the foreigners. Social opportunities are provided for the several nationalities, and with this new program there has come a new enthusiasm on the part of the older members of the parish, and there is growing a new loyalty which finds its cause, not in the memories of a great past, but in a useful present. Fortunately, they are able to take care of themselves financially. But the same changed program can be worked in other churches not as wealthy if only our Boards are geared so that they can early come to the aid in needy cases.

We need to recognize that that is our responsibility. The local church in most instances would be no more able to put on a program of that kind alone than the churches in college communities are able to meet their situation. Nor should we expect them to do so. The opportunity for service is theirs; the responsibility for that service is ours, and that is the thing which we need to realize and to preach.

And again, unless we can successfully meet the

challenge of these foreign born in our midst, we can hardly justify our own foreign missionary program. True, as a Home Missionary problem this work is far less romantic than if it was a Foreign Missionary idea, because the appeal to distant lands and distant peoples has gone out of it. It is easy to become sentimentally moved about the conditions of Chinamen in China, but it is a different matter when we think of Chinese needs in terms of the laundryman just around the corner. It is easy for us to become sympathetic as we hear of the terrible conditions in the Near East. It is a different matter when these same people move into our block.

The natives of foreign lands have always been mystified by the contrast of spirit which they have noticed between the trader and the tourist on the one hand, and the missionary on the other. Of course the missionaries have been able to satisfactorily explain the difference by saying that the traders and tourists as a rule are not representative of this great Christian land. But the day of isolation has gone forever. The natives of every civilized nation of the world depend today neither upon trader nor missionary for their ideas of our country. They read our news and know something of our way of life.

But we are not particularly proud of that phase of our life which "Makes News." It does not represent the best phases of our experience, and we hope the foreigner will not base his opinion of us on that evidence alone. But, now if in addition to that news element, letters going from emigrants who stay here, and the testimony of those emigrants who return to their native lands, declare that in America the churches are

not actuated by that kindly spirit characteristic of our foreign missionaries; if they unite in reporting that here we are not interested in people of strange tongues and strange traditions; that instead of going to them in a spirit of mutual helpfulness, as missionaries go in foreign lands, we run away from them the minute they move into our neighborhood, it will then be difficult for the people of those lands to feel that we are genuine in our foreign missionary approach to them. In other words they will be justified in asking, "Why are you interested in us here, when if we merely change our place of residence from this spot to some spot in America, you would have no use for us whatever?"

Now, this is not an exaggeration of conditions as they exist. There are in this country today thousands of foreign students who first heard of Christianity and of America through the teaching of our missionaries. They came here full of hope, thrilled at the idea of living in a society such as the missionaries had pictured for them. They have been disillusioned. If their skin is dark, in some sections of our country they are not allowed to ride in the same car with white people; they are not allowed to eat in the same dining room, nor to stay at the same hotels, no matter what their culture, no matter what their family pride happens to be. They learn our vocabulary, "Guinea" "Wop," "Nigger," and all the other disagreeable expressions of an un-Christian pride, and they are disgusted. You can be sure that their return to their old homes is not going to make easy the path of those men and women who are there preaching the glories of our Christian Gospel.

There have always been people who have said that they had no use for Foreign Missions because there was so much to be done at home, but the time is coming, and coming quickly when it will do us little good to be interested in Foreign Missions unless we rise to our opportunity here at home.

Making America Christian is still our task. And as we learn the full meaning of that phrase, we see that the job is growing year by year. So instead of looking for an early end to our work, as did that layman I quoted at the beginning of this article, we can look to the New Century, assured that our task is still calling us to increased effort. Making America Christian means not alone the supporting of frontier mission stations, but an enlarged program that will satisfy the growing life of our rural communities. It means also the inspiring and spiritualizing of the millions of our suburban population; and it means finally the cultivating of a Christian fellowship with those whose antecedents are different from ours, but whose future destiny is bound together with ours.

Surely, the second century program of Home Missions is a great vision. May it be said of us, as we can say of the founders of our work: "They were not disobedient to the Heavenly Vision. As they saw so they labored—as they labored so they achieved—according to their achievement, the Kingdom has come a little nearer realization."